

# Postcolonial Discourses and 'Sex Tourism'

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## Postcolonial Discourses and 'Sex Tourism'

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**Explore some of the ways in which postcolonial discourses might help us to understand the contemporary 'Sex Tourism' industries in the Caribbean and Southeast Asia.**

An extraordinarily complex notion that escapes simple definition, sex tourism has become a significant contributor to the income of the tourism industry in recent years. How, though, have we come to define sex tourism? In what ways has postcolonialism assisted in constructing our understanding of it? How might we extend the application of postcolonial discourses to assist in developing that comprehension? Herein is a consideration of these questions. First, we will consider the issue of defining sex tourism in its broadest terms, before paying specific attention to Bhabha's (1994) idea of *liminality* and Pratt's (1992) conception of *contact zones*.

Before considering how it is that postcolonial language and ideas have been or may be invoked in discussions of sex tourism, it is imperative to look first at how it is we define sex tourism itself, and whom exactly we see as sex tourists. It has been consistently pointed out by many academics researching within the arena of sex tourism that to define the phenomenon is nothing short of impossible. Ryan and Hall (2001) suggest that to define it simply as any tourist excursion where the primary motivation of the trip is to have sexual relations with somebody is an oversimplification of a very complex interaction. O'Connell Davidson takes out motivation from the definition, arguing that we might conceptualise sex tourism as the activity of individuals who 'use their economic power to attain powers of sexual command over local women, men and/or children while travelling' (1998: 75). In different areas of the world – and sex tourism in its multitudinous forms takes place globally – there are very different trends and patterns in the types of sex tourism that go on.

One tends to assume that women are never themselves sex tourists. Informed by deeply inscribed discourses around the natural licentiousness of men and an apparently natural lack of sexual agency amongst women (Weeks 1996), many would be surprised to learn that, although the majority of sex tourism in the Caribbean is defined by heterosexual relations between male sex tourists and female sex workers (Kempadoo 2004: 119), there is also a significant amount of female sex tourism between wealthy white European and North American women and young males indigenous to the Caribbean islands (Herold, Garcia and DeMoya 2001; Phillips 1999; O'Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor 1999).

On the global sex tourism stage, instances of male sex tourists engaging with male sex workers are not uncommon either. Research into gay sex tourism in Europe such as Bunzl's ethnographic study of middle-aged Austrian males visiting Prague to have sex with younger male prostitutes, paints a picture of an active European gay sex tourism scene. Along with this, various Caribbean countries such as the Dominican Republic, Sint Maarten and Curaçao are known to host gay sexual encounters between sex workers and tourists (DeMoya and Garcia 1999; Martis 1999).

With only a few examples it is evident that what we call sex tourism takes place in many places, and between many people. The variety of sexual expression is as diverse as those who practice sex tourism, both as those who have sex on their excursions and those sex workers who accommodate such sexual encounters. It is necessary, therefore, to outline some clear boundaries for this short discussion of sex tourism and postcolonialism.

As this essay is an exploration of how postcolonial discourses can assist in the development of an understanding of

# Postcolonial Discourses and 'Sex Tourism'

Written by Ros Williams

sex tourism, I have elected to limit my discussion to sex tourism taking place in areas affected by European and North American imperial expansion, namely the Caribbean with some reference to Southeast Asia too. One of the reasons behind this choice is because postcolonialism itself is primarily a reaction to, and analysis of, the global colonial legacy. Indeed, some of the academics considered in this essay have come to the conclusion that in the Caribbean and Southeast Asia, sex tourism is best understood as a contemporary product of imperialism.

It is perhaps worth the mention of a few examples of the colonial histories of the Caribbean and Southeast Asia. For instance, the transatlantic slave trade and plantation economies that came to define the Caribbean for Europe for the duration of the British Empire's expansion; or the use of Southeast Asian countries as the battleground for warfare between the Japanese military and World War II allied forces. With histories so intertwined with European and North American imperial efforts, the Caribbean and Southeast Asia are well suited as examples in a discussion of how sex tourism might come to be understood within a postcolonial framework.

Another motivation for limiting myself to these areas of the globe is the existence of large bodies of work focusing on their sex tourism industries. There is, therefore, an exciting and well-founded beginning upon which to tease out some of the various ways we might come to understand sex tourism through the lens of postcolonialism. In such a short space, however, it would be naïve even to entertain the idea that an all-encompassing consideration of how the very heterogeneous notion of sex tourism plays itself out in its disparate manifestations in these areas of the globe. At most, then, this essay can only offer a preliminary example of how the wide-spread and diverse arena of postcolonialism might have use in application to sex tourism.

Further limitations must be set in terms of the *type* of sex tourism taking place in these geographical areas that will be considered herein. This essay will be considering only male sex tourism with female sex workers. To expand the consideration any further within the confines of this relatively short essay would not allow room for the necessary considerations of the configurations of power and the expressions of gender and sexuality at work in homosexual sex tourism, or between female sex tourists and male sex workers. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the essay will be in-depth in its execution, and illustrate how fruitful postcolonialism can be in coming to an understanding of our contemporary situation, specifically in regards to Caribbean and Southeast Asian heterosexual sex tourism between male sex tourists and female sex workers.

It would be worthwhile, before looking at how we might use postcolonial ideas to further our understanding of sex tourism, to try and understand *why* sex tourism can be so fruitfully conceptualised within a postcolonial framework. Perhaps the best place to start is with Martiniquais philosopher Franz Fanon, who writes that

'centres of rest and relaxation and pleasure resorts [were developed] to meet the wishes of the Western bourgeoisie. Such activity is given the name of tourism, and for the occasion will be built up as a national industry ... The casinos of Havana and of Mexico, the beaches of Rio, the little Brazilian and Mexican girls, the half-breed thirteen-year-olds, the ports of Acapulco and Copacabana – all these are the stigma of this depravation of the national middle class ... [who] will have nothing better to do than to take on the role of manager for Western enterprise, and it will in practice set up its country as the brothel of Europe.' (1967: 123)

Fanon's prescient use of language effectively describes our contemporary situation. In certain areas of the globe, it certainly *appears* that sex industries have been developed to cater to the traveller. But is it simply a coincidence that in many circumstances, the set up of the European or North American white man coming to the foreign land to utilise prostitutes from the place to which he travels mirrors the colonial situation as it manifested itself centuries before? White colonisers travelled to distant places and, in the course of the proceedings, developed sexual relationships with women indigenous to the island. Kempadoo sees no coincidence whatsoever in this parallel.

Today's prostitution in the Caribbean islands, argues Kempadoo, relates directly to their colonial history. 'Inextricably tied to the power and control exerted by European colonizers over black women since the sixteenth century' (1999: 5), one *must* look at the history of prostitution in the Caribbean to understand its contemporary manifestations. She argues that white slave owners happily employed their supposed right to physical access of their slaves. Similarly, in Southeast Asia, a trajectory from older embodiments of imperialism to modern sex tourism can be found in much

# Postcolonial Discourses and 'Sex Tourism'

Written by Ros Williams

academic literature over the last few decades. Jeffreys (2009) notes that military prostitution was part of the rest and recreation regimes used by the US military forces in Southeast Asia after World War II. She, along with several others, sees this as a substantial part of the historical foundation upon which the lucrative Korean, Thai and Filipino sex industries, including sex tourism, are built. (Poulin 2003; Leheny 1994; Truong 1990, 1983). For Southeast Asia and the Caribbean alike, North American and European imperialism – albeit on different timescales – has played a primary role in the development of their sex trade industries.

It might also be noted that Kempadoo recognises the importance of the production of a host of discourses that constructed the black slave woman as a naturally lascivious, sexually overt character. Indeed, these constructions were readily available in many texts written and art produced during that era of colonial expansion, and much analysis of them has been undertaken. For example, Gilman's deconstruction of pictorial representations of Saartjie Baartman, known in Europe as Sarah Bartmann, and displayed across the continent in her naked state to show audiences her large buttocks. According to Gilman, her nude body and specifically her genitalia would 'serve as the central image for the black female throughout the nineteenth century' (1985: 216). One might also adduce the consideration of Flaubert's writing offered in Said's *Orientalism*, wherein the nineteenth-century French novelist is found to consistently establish the Egyptian setting as one of 'sexual promise [and] untiring sensuality' (1979: 188).

Striking examples of this eroticization exist in modern travel literature. To be found on the shelves of travel agents in the US and Spain are brochures of holidays destinations in South America. Within them, local people 'are adorned in colourful "native" dress, while in reality most residents ... wear contemporary Western dress' (Casellas and Holcomb 2001: 161). Brochures for the Caribbean are similar, 'appropriating the image of Caribbean sexuality to seduce and entice potential clients' (Kempadoo 2004: 134). The depictions sell the idea of the exotic land, and it becomes apparent fairly quickly when reading research into the advertisements of holidays to countries in the Caribbean and South America, that most representations rely on an idealised exoticism wherein the tourist and the indigenous population are constructed as oppositional.

It has also been noted that the common contemporary European and North American media portrayal of hypersexual Southeastern Asian women which reduces them to 'exotic, lusty ... little, brown fucking machines' has played a significant role in the success of the Southeast Asian tourism industry (Lim 1998). This is illustrative of how Southeast Asia, like the Caribbean, has been *produced* through contemporary European and North American discourses (via media such as tourism literature and cinema) just as South America and the Caribbean have been. Interestingly, much academic writing has concluded that these representations are forged from – and for – the privileged heterosexual male gaze (Hasseler 2008; Kim and Chung 2005; Cohen 2001; Taylor 2001; Pritchard and Morgan 2000), the demographic that makes up the majority of sex tourists in the Caribbean and Southeast Asia (Kempadoo 2004, Truong 1990).

This brief overview gives an idea of the historical foundations of sex tourism in the Caribbean and Southeast Asia in reference to North American and European colonial and imperial efforts over several centuries. That the industries are regularly perceived of as a legacy of those efforts makes them ideal subjects for the application of postcolonial concepts. A review of some of the past literature on the subject of defining sex tourism will offer us some idea of how people have previously come to understand sex tourism, and will be of use in understanding how postcolonial discourses can assist us in developing a robust and inclusive comprehension.

Ryan and Hall (2001) posit that the idea of liminality can prove a productive tool in this endeavour. In their understanding, inspired by Turner's (1969) development of the conception to understand rites of passages within societies, they define the liminal individual as she or he who exists in the metaphysical and often literal gap between different spaces. They argue that both the tourist who purchases sex, and the person who solicits it, can both be seen in terms of liminality. However, whilst tourists are an impermanent 'socially sanctioned and economically empowered' liminality (2001: 1), the prostitute occupies a more long-term, and significantly more stigmatised, liminal space. Liminality, therefore, does not necessarily imply disempowerment. However, as Illouz's writing on travel and romance suggests, liminality is perhaps a more useful idea for understanding the sex tourist than it is for understanding the sex worker with whom the tourist interacts:

## Postcolonial Discourses and 'Sex Tourism'

Written by Ros Williams

'During travel, people remove themselves, geographically and symbolically, from the normal conduct of their lives ... Institutionalized as vacation, travel takes on the ritual character of cyclical events in which people detach themselves from their daily urban lives and gain access to another order of reality. *Romantic travel enacts the three stages that characterize liminality: separation, marginalization, and reaggregation.*' (1997: 142, my italics)

These stages imply that liminality has a beginning and an end. The tourist's time as a liminal person lasts as long as their time abroad. But what of the sex worker who continues in their line of trade after the tourist has boarded their plane back home?

Truong (1990), in her discussion of sex work in Thailand, notes that in many cases, sex work is informal. Employed as a bar worker, or perhaps as a waitress or dancer, sex work is often an aside to increase income. As the work is not even formal for many involved, does liminality as a prostitute have a beginning? If they move in and out of the trade, a frequent occurrence for many involved in the sex trade both in Thailand and internationally (Kempadoo 2004; Kindon 2001; O'Connell Davidson 1998; Truong 1990), does their liminality have an end where the sex worker is aggregated back into their social milieu?

Ryan and Hall's adoption of liminality is perhaps limited; they note this themselves in acknowledging the difference between a 'woman taken by force to work in backstreet brothels ... [and one] who has considerable control over her clientele' (2001: 54). Talking of sex tourism in the language of liminality can be fruitful in formulating an understanding of the tourist, but can be reductive when talking of the sex worker involved in transactions with the tourist, because of the multi-dimensionality of this field of sex work, and the challenges found in defining stages of liminality.

If liminality is to be used as a tool for understanding sex work in the arena of sex tourism, there may be greater efficacy to be found by invoking Homi Bhabha's adoption of the term. The introduction to his *The Location of Culture* offers a discussion of liminality as a concept that might be used to construct a more intricate understanding of national identity:

'It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed 'in-between', or in excess of, the sum of the 'parts' of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable?' (1994: 2)

Here, Bhabha is arguing that the idea of shared cultural or national identities can make invisible the plurality within groups of people. Race, class and gender, he writes, play a role in shaping individual experience, and communities who one might assume share consensuses are in constant negotiation against one another for recognition of their validity. Bhabha posits that the ahistorical and irreducible cultural idiosyncrasies that define our nationalities and identities are inimical to the formulation of an understanding of the rich complexities of the individual within their social milieu. Liminalities, the passages between these absolute identifications, represent the potentiality for cultural hybridity predicated not on a hierarchy of importance, but on the acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of any community, local or national.

Perloff points out that Bhabha's argument has great appeal in proposing that the field of postcoloniality 'is one of performative contestation rather than ethnic national separation and rivalry' (1999: 124). However, Bhabha and his postcolonial contemporaries spend much of their time analysing novels, poetry and art work, and, as enlightening and crucial as the work Bhabha has produced is, its limit to textual analysis makes it all the more ripe for application to tangible real life.

The sex workers engaged by tourists exist in the liminality that Bhabha writes of. Truong, for example, explains that in Thailand, whilst the tourist industry operates within a well-organised financial and legal framework, 'sexual services

## Postcolonial Discourses and 'Sex Tourism'

Written by Ros Williams

are produced on the edge of legal ambiguity' (1990: 180). Prostitution there is illegal, and so sex workers are criminalized while 'personal services' are simultaneously recognised as a lucrative facet of the tourist model. The sex worker, then, is not part of the legal and accepted model of tourism that Thailand has adopted, and remains at the very margin of that national identity.

The 'alien territory' (Bhabha 1990: 38) of liminality works well to explain the situation for many sex workers in the world who are viewed within their national legal frameworks as criminals, or who are perhaps tolerated in 'licensed areas'. Tolerance zones, red light districts, areas where the police will essentially ignore illegal activity; these places are themselves liminal spaces. Legal or illegal? Tolerated or ignored? Proposals in 2005 for a safety zone for prostitutes in Liverpool illustrate this ambiguity well; a representative of the city's council assuaged public concern with the delivery of an incredibly abstruse statement riddled with ambiguity: "We are not proposing a tolerance zone, but an intolerance zone. We will allow prostitutes to work but we will be intolerant of prostitution" (BBC, 2005).

The negotiation over what is acceptable is constant for the sex worker, and liminality is a useful tool in the development of the understanding of the heterogeneity of the sex worker experience. Ryan and Hall's usage of liminality works well to describe the situation of the sex tourist too. However, the notion of liminality, in Bhabha's sense or its more traditional anthropological sense as Ryan and Hall utilised it, offers a fairly abstract notion that deals as much with a metaphysical sense of marginality as it does a somatic one. Perhaps, then, the actual meeting of the two parties – the worker and tourist – can be conceived of using a different notion: the 'contact zone', developed by Pratt in her 1992 work, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*.

Pratt's work is concerned with how travel writing came to produce an idea of the non-Western world for the Europeans who read it. Along with this, she considers how the Europeans who wrote and read this travel writing developed a conception of their own subjectivity entirely distinct from, but always in relation to, a homogenous 'rest of the world'. A key theme in the book is Pratt's insistence that the outsider – the rest of the world – was agential in the formation of the metropole's knowledge of itself. The imperial nation, she argues, 'habitually blinds itself to the ways in which the periphery determines the metropolis – beginning perhaps, with the latter's obsessive need to present and re-present its peripheries and its others continually to itself' (1992: 6).

*Imperial Eyes* utilises the term 'contact zone', which Pratt describes as 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination, like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today' (ibid: 4). For Pratt, these zones or spaces are *physical* ones, wherein individuals and communities separated by geography literally come into contact, and these relations usually involve elements of 'coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict' (ibid: 6).

One of the common elements that Pratt recognised amongst much writing produced in or about the contact zone was the European protagonist's constant construction of himself (and, with a few exceptions, it was always a *he*) as a vulnerable individual without any great sense of authority. These 'anti-conquest' writings, as Pratt calls them, share a strategy 'of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony' (ibid: 7). She argues, after close analysis of primary texts, that many naturalist writers of the eighteenth-century were especially prone to adopting the demeanor of anti-conquest, whilst at the same time accruing masses of information through surveillance – 'he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess' (ibid). For Pratt, anti-conquest cannot be read at face value because the apparently innocent protagonist plays a significant role in the production of knowledge and the construction of European self-hood.

The fact that these zones are literal, tangible *places* makes the notion an especially useful one for sex tourism in which real people undertake actual interaction with one another in physical spaces. Indeed, Pratt writes about the commonality of sexual relations between male imperial subjects and indigenous women of the contact zone in much eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travel literature. In some cases, the writer assumes the position of anti-conquest; Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior of Africa* sees Park become 'the object of the female gaze, whose aggressive voyeurism feminizes him in the process. ... Park portrays himself as the involuntary erotic object of the African women' (ibid: 82).

## Postcolonial Discourses and 'Sex Tourism'

Written by Ros Williams

In another instance, Pratt looks at John Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* wherein the author, smitten with Joanna, a woman he meets in the contact zone, decides to marry her, moves back to England, marries once more, then hears of his Surinamese wife's death five years later. Stedman's marriage to Joanna is an example, argues Pratt, of 'a romantic transformation of a particular form of colonial sexual exploitation, whereby European men on assignment to the colonies bought local women from their families to serve as sexual and domestic partners for the duration of their stay' (ibid: 95).

Pratt's analyses of Park and Stedman illustrate centuries-old instances of sexual encounters between travelers and those who inhabit the destinations of those travels and the notions of the contact zone and anti-conquest, as Pratt herself demonstrates, are useful in describing the sexual encounters written of in travel writing of the colonial era. What use, then, might Pratt's notions have for us today when considering sex tourism? It might be argued that the physical encounter between the sex tourist and the sex worker takes place in a contemporary contact zone.

In *Imperial Eyes*, the contact zone is described as any place wherein the trajectories of different subjects who have heretofore been separated spatially and historically meet. The word contact is specifically used to invoke the idea of interactivity, and negotiation, even if on an unequal terrain of power. Pratt writes:

'A "contact" perspective emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations among colonizers and colonized, or travelers and "travelees," not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.'" (ibid.)

It is not difficult to see how one can equate the transactions of contemporary sex tourism with the 'copresence' of the literature that Pratt reviews. In the Caribbean, for instance, these 'radically asymmetrical relations of power' play themselves out on a quotidian basis between tourists and locals. Kempadoo notes that tourists receive preferential treatment. In the case of a legal infraction, the police do not apprehend tourists in the same way they would locals. Equally, tourist hotels take up the most aesthetically pleasing beach locations, consuming the majority of the energy and water supplies of the towns in which they are built. 'The overwhelming whiteness of tourists', argues Kempadoo, 'places them automatically in a position of privilege in a region where the combination of light skin colour and European or North American ethnic and cultural heritage has signified power and authority' (2004: 120).

It has also been pointed out that many Caribbean natives cannot necessarily afford to go on holiday like the tourists who visit the islands. 'They are too poor to escape the reality of their lives; and they are too poor to live properly in the place where they live' (Kincaid 1988: 18). This fact, argues Kempadoo, puts the tourist in a privileged position over the Caribbean people, who are in turn pushed towards careers in the tourism sector. As one researcher's discussions with Bahamian craftswomen notes, their failure 'to smile' and be 'nice' to all tourists at all times would mean a loss of economic resources, sending the country into virtual poverty' (Higgs 2008: 14).

Sex tourism, rather than tourism, is a paradigm that offers a new dimension of asymmetrical power. Leaving unconsidered the middle persons who may or may not assist in facilitating the sexual interplay involved in sex tourism, and juxtapose the position of the tourist and the position of the prostitute, it is clear that in essentially every case the tourist is extremely better off than the prostitute in terms of their economic position. Ryan and Hall note that, whilst one can make money out of the sex industry, sex workers will rarely become rich: 'prostitution may provide 'the bread', but the extra 'jam' is more noticeable by its absence rather than presence' (2001: 51), and as Kempadoo points out, what might seem to a great sum of money to the prostitute will usually seem to much cheaper to the man who sleeps with her. As one tourist points out, 'you can have any girl you want ... that's because the average salary is about US \$10 per month and they know that hanging out with a foreigner will bring them something ... and you'll be treated like a king' (2004: 122).

Pratt's idea of the anti-conquest is also a useful one when considering sex tourism within the bounds of postcolonial discourses. Just as many narrators in the travel literature Pratt analyses 'seek to secure their innocence' (1992: 7), qualitative research into male sex tourists depicts the subjects frequently constructing their own passivity through expounding the agency of the indigenous women they sleep with.

# Postcolonial Discourses and 'Sex Tourism'

Written by Ros Williams

One tourist discussing his experiences in the Caribbean claims that 'none of these are real hookers – most are part time girls who like sex' (Barry 1984: 40). Another says the prostitute he bought sex off was in fact 'just a very attractive horny girl'. One participant claimed that 'the women were chasing me around' (Kempadoo 2004: 123). 'They even fight with each other over you' (O'Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor 1999: 38), said another. Kempadoo also notes a tendency for male tourists paint their visits as a means of benefiting the poor and oppressed, 'presenting themselves as benefactors' (2004: 124) of the nations they visit: the anti-conquest narrator, it can be argued, is embodied in many of the men who have rationalised their sex tourism as a way of doing good.

Throughout this short essay, we have seen how difficult it is to define sex tourism in and of itself. It was contended variously that motivation played a role in being 'a sex tourist', but so too was it vocalized that the simple monetary transaction in exchange for sex whilst in a foreign country qualified somebody as a sex tourist. The industry exists all around the world, between very many different types of people, but for this discussion, the definition was limited to heterosexual sex between male tourists and female sex workers in the Caribbean and Southeast Asia.

The application of the postcolonial notion of liminality proved one useful way of reframing the dynamics of sex tourism by positing that there was a shared element of marginality for both the tourist and the sex worker. Southeast Asia was utilised as an example here to illustrate how Ryan and Hall's (2001) use of the term might be applied to both tourists and sex workers. It was an adoption of Bhabha's (1994) conception of the term that was perhaps more useful for coming to understand the sex worker, especially the Southeast Asian sex worker who teeters precariously on the margin of legality by participating in an industry which is illegal yet imperative to the success of the tourism trade that keeps the country's economy upright.

Pratt's (1992) concept of the contact zone proved useful in this attempt to understand sex tourism from a postcolonial perspective. It was argued that Pratt's notion, used to describe the setting where the colonisers come into contact with the indigenous peoples of the land on which they stand, can be used for the sex tourist dynamic. Pratt notes that the contact zone is usually defined by a gross imbalance of power, and this is true of most manifestations of contemporary sex tourism, wherein the tourist has an advantage over the sex worker both economically and, by default, by their assumption of the label 'tourist' which is not a label that *could* be adopted by most sex workers for lack of funds.

Postcolonial ideas, then, offer sociology a rich range from which to draw new ways of conceptualizing sex tourism. It seems fitting that postcolonialism, itself a way of thinking about and analysing the colonial legacy, is a useful tool for conceptualizing sex tourism, which can be seen in many of its manifestations as a product of colonialism and imperialism. This brief essay, it is hoped, serves to illustrate the potential for further exploration of this application.

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## Postcolonial Discourses and 'Sex Tourism'

Written by Ros Williams

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Written by Ros Williams

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